

## ***Jesus, What Have You to Do with Us?***

**Rev. Durrell Watkins**

**Mark 1.21-28**

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My great-aunt Gladys couldn't ever be bothered with details. She once dropped off some prescriptions at the pharmacy and went back later to pick them up. The pharmacist handed her a bag with two of her prescriptions filled and in the bag, but the third prescription was stapled to the bag, unfilled. Furious, she demanded, "Why hasn't this one been filled?" "We can't," the pharmacist said. "Why not?" "We just don't have what that calls for." Aunt Gladys demanded, "Can't you order it?" "No ma'am we can't." "And just why the heck not?" "Because, ma'am, it's a prescription for a chest x-ray."

Can't connect that to the gospel, but was worth sharing anyway.

We see Jesus in today's gospel story teaching in the synagogue. Now, I don't know how he came to be teaching during a worship service...was it open mic night? Was he invited to speak? Was it small congregation with a custom of allowing anyone speak who wanted to? Mark doesn't say. He just puts us at a worship service and tells us that at the service, Jesus shares some thoughts.

Of course, Mark also doesn't tell us what those thoughts are. What was Jesus teaching? Mark doesn't seem to think that's important information for us to have. He's more interested in the response to Jesus' teaching than in the content of that teaching.

But my guess is that Jesus' message was one of liberation. Not only is that consistently his message in the gospels, but it is particularly his message in Mark's gospel. And that he spoke in a way that got people stirred up also leads me to believe that he really challenged some assumptions. He made people think. He both comforted the afflicted AND afflicted the comfortable.

He probably spoke about hope and freedom and empowerment and inclusion...he probably put a new spin on old ideas, a new understanding on scriptures that had been interpreted in narrow ways. That's the kind of performance that would have got the crowd talking...the people who loved it were in awe; the people who were threatened by it were angry. Both sides would have been buzzing.

Suddenly, something happened. Someone cries out. Have you ever been in a worship service that so stirred you that you laughed out loud, or wept uncontrollably, or nodded vigorously in agreement, or shouted out with joy? Have you ever heard something that was so welcoming, so healing, so empowering, so life-changing that you had to physically respond? Maybe you lifted your hands in praise, or bowed your head in reverence, but you were moved and you felt compelled to respond to the good news that had saturated your being in that sacred moment!

In response to Jesus' message of empowerment and liberation, someone in that congregation is moved to respond. He cries out. Now, who was this person?

We're told he's someone with an unclean spirit. Mark lives in a world where demons are considered real. What we consider superstition today carried the weight of science in antiquity. I have no doubt that when Mark says this person was demon possessed, that he was filled with something malevolent, that his very essence is somehow damaged or unclean...he means that. Demonology is part of his worldview. It makes sense to him and he is using the language of his culture and understanding.

When a person doesn't feel whole...when a person feels cut off from his or her divine source...when a person feels unworthy, alone, forgotten, condemned, oppressed, or unlovable, that feeling can produce effects that are without question diabolical.

When society, religion, family, and government conspire to deny the sacred value and human rights of any person, that act is undeniably heinous and horribly cruel. In the English language, Evil is the opposite of Live...evil is live spelled backwards...whatever denies life, keeps life from flourishing, keeps joy or hope from one's experience of life can be considered evil...it is the opposite of what is life-giving.

Our diagnostic skills and treatment options may be far superior to what was available in Mark's day, but then, as now, some people have felt unwanted, unworthy, unclean, and those people have needed the help of not only good medicine and good social systems and good relationships, but also the help of good, inclusive, progressive, positive, practical, life-affirming religion. Whatever denies our sacred value is fiendish, not matter what we call it.

And so, a man with an unclean spirit, an outlook on life that has been damaged by negative thoughts and pessimistic attitudes, a person who has been deeply wounded, who doesn't yet feel whole cries out. He's heard the good news and that requires a response.

"Jesus, you are the holy one of God, what have you to do with us?"

I met a woman who left an unhappy marriage 40 years ago. In the meantime, she had remarried, raised a family, had a career...a seemingly good life. But because of her religious background, she always felt guilty for having been divorced. She felt less than whole, unclean...she wondered if Jesus would have anything to do with her.

I meet people almost every week of my life who have been told that because they are same-gender loving people that they are somehow unacceptable to God. They've been verbally abused by people religious leaders who have used God's name in vain to fill them with shame and fear and self-loathing. They feel...well, unclean. They wonder if Jesus would have anything to do with them.

The man in our story hears good news, and maybe he thinks it's too good to be true; too good to include him. He cries out; and Jesus responds.

Religious Legalism - Be silent and come out of him!  
The inability to forgive - Be silent and come out of him!  
Intolerance of those who are different - Be silent and come out of him!  
The abuse of scripture to exclude or condemn - Be silent and come out of him!  
Fear of a petty, punishing, vengeful, god - Be silent and come out of him!  
Shame, fear, regret or self-loathing - Be silent and come out of him!  
Come out of her; come out of them.

Hearing and embracing good news may not make the situation quickly change. Difficulties may persist, but the freedom is in how we respond to those difficulties. We can be free to respond with compassion, with hope, with courage. We can see and seize possibilities even when things are difficult. We can take the hard reality and make something good of it. We are free to change our attitude and our response at any time and when we exercise that freedom we wind up exorcising the demon, the unclean spirit, the negative attitude, the debilitating disposition, the bitterness, the hopelessness, the despair.

The difficulty may not let go easily, but authority of divine compassion, hope, empowerment doesn't back down either. In the end, divine power is the power of hope and wholeness, and that power is greater than what tries to torment us.

Michael Beckwith teaches us, "You can break yourself free from your hereditary patterns, cultural codes, social beliefs; and prove once and for all that the power within you is greater than the power that's in the world."

The demons aren't the outside circumstances; the demons are the internal perceptions, attitudes, and habitually negative thought patterns. The circumstances may not change soon, but the inward landscape can change. We have the freedom and the power, the "authority" to make those internal changes, and once we change our perception we have changed our experience and we didn't have to wait for the outside to change at all.

That's the authoritative teaching that Jesus offers today.  
That's the miraculous power of the spirit of wholeness, the holy spirit.  
That's the divine principle that can overcome the demons of despair.  
That's the freedom that Jesus teaches, models, and offers.  
And that's the good news. Amen.

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I embrace Good News today!  
The comforting Spirit guides me.  
The Light of Christ empowers me.  
The love of God restores me.  
I live in the authority of Christ.  
And I am free.  
Thank you, God!  
Amen.

"You can break yourself free from your hereditary patterns, cultural codes, social beliefs; and prove once and for all that the power within you is greater than the power that's in the world." – Michael Beckwith